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Errant Soviet missile fired from submarine

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The Soviet cruise missile that violated Norwegian and Finnish airspace 10 days ago was launched from a submarine and designed to simulate an incoming U.S. cruise missile, according to U.S. intelligence sources.

It was to serve as a target for local naval forces on exercises in the Barents Sea, the sources said.

But the missile, an obsolescent SS-N-3 and an older version of the cruise missile currently carried by submarines and cruisers, was not shot down as planned, and it headed in the wrong direction.

Moreover, according to these same sources, the naval exercise commander failed to inform Soviet air defense, including missile and aircraft units, of the errant cruise missile — a failure which resulted in severe reprimands being handed out by Moscow to the officers responsible for the incident.

U.S. intelligence also reports that there is no evidence of the missile, NATO code-named Shaddock, being armed with a nuclear warhead. The Shaddock, however, can carry a warhead with a yield of 350 kilotons, according to the authoritative Jane's Weapons Systems.

The SS-N-3 missile is carried by three older types of Soviet submarines, code-named the Whiskey Long-bin, the Juliett, and Echo II class. Analysts are not certain whether the stray Soviet missile was fired from a submerged vessel or from the surface.

U.S. intelligence analysts also believe the incident indicates the continued low state of readiness of Soviet air defense — a problem exposed by two earlier intrusions of Soviet airspace by Korean jet airliners in 1978 and 1983. They also believe the incident demonstrates that Soviet air defense is unable to react to unexpected situations.

U.S. intelligence also indicates that the cruise missile was in the air for 20 minutes and reached a maximum altitude of 4,000 meters (a little more than two miles), indicating the missile was not following its designed capability of closely hugging the ground to escape radar detection -- a leading characteristic of cruise missiles. If it did land in Finland's Lake Inari, then the Soviet rocket reached its maximum range of some 250 miles.

U.S. intelligence also believes the Shaddock was not a "classic drone," as depicted in the Soviet apology issued Friday, although it was meant to be a target missile.

While the Soviets expressed regrets, reflecting their desire to downplay the affair on the eve of the opening of arms-control talks, they referred to the SS-N-3 to as "winged target" and not a missile. Moreover, they did not confirm that the flight violated Norwegian and Finnish air space.

The Shaddock is the largest of the Soviet cruise missiles and has been in service, according to Jane's, for approximately a decade. It has been steadily modified, and can be launched from submarine or surface ships.

American intelligence, which tracked the missile's path over the Kola peninsula and then Norway and finally Finland, is still not sure what went wrong.